Echoes of Euaggelistes: Forming the Laity for the New Evangelization

by Susan M. Timoney

Introduction

In ancient Greece, when military battles were waged and won, an euaggelistes or messenger was chosen from among the slaves to carry the eu-angelos—the good news—back to the victorious king. This was a much coveted job not only for the obvious honor, but because the king, upon receiving the good news, would award the messenger-slave with his freedom.¹

When God sent his Son into the world to announce the Good News of salvation, it too was a message of freedom. Echoing the victorious Greeks, Jesus entrusted the message to his followers: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). In our own time, Pope Benedict XVI heard the echo and, at his Inauguration Mass, proclaimed that “the Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.”²

Leading people toward an encounter with the living Christ shapes the evangelizing mission of the Church. Bearing the Good News to the world is not a mission of the church, it is, as Pope Paul VI succinctly stated in Evangeli Nuntiandi, “the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity.”³

The vocation to evangelize, like the universal call to holiness, is the vocation of all the baptized. Baptized to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Jesus, the secular character of the laity enables men and women to evangelize in places where priests are unable to go—in the family, on the job, and in the marketplace. Aurelie Hagstrom, writing on the mission of the laity, points out that “the ordinary activities of life that make up the day of lay women and men find deep meaning and fulfillment through the grace of Baptism.”⁴ Evangelization is the co-responsibility of clergy and laity together.⁵

² Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate (April 24, 2005): AAS 97 (2005), 710.
³ Pope Paul VI, Evangeli Nuntiandi, #14.
This paper will address the formation of the laity as evangelizers through examining the call to evangelization, the challenges in forming women and men as evangelizers, and the conformity of the laity to the mission.

The Call

In the past forty years, the church has witnessed two movements that highlight the evangelizing nature of the lay mission and vocation. The Second Vatican Council’s recovery of the biblical sense of holiness invites laywomen and men to see all aspects of their lives as vocational. From the time that God entered into a covenant with his people, holiness became both the meaning and the way of life for all those seeking union with God (Leviticus 26:11-12). The author of 1 Peter writes “… as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You can be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1: 15-16). In living out the priestly, prophetic, and kingly charisms, it is the laity in their secular character that turn the face of the church to the world. It is the lay expression of the three-fold Baptismal charisms that will shape the laity's participation in the New Evangelization.

The New Evangelization is the second movement that defines the mission of the laity. It is as if the sound of the echo of the messengers of the Good News carried a particular note of urgency for Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Looking toward the coming of the third millennium at the beginning of his pontificate, Blessed John Paul II identified three distinct mission fields for a new evangelization. The first is the mission to the un-churched. For most of its history, the missionary impulse of the church was to people who had not yet received the Gospel. Because of the church's fidelity to its deepest identity, there is not a part of the globe to which the Good News has not been carried. Still, there exist people who have not yet heard the proclamation or encountered the Risen Christ. Today, evangelism describes the proclamation of the Gospel to the un-churched. The second mission is the call for the ongoing conversion of those who already have heard the Good News, those who may have been initiated through baptism into the church but, for many and varied reasons, are inactive in the practice of the faith. It is this group of inactive Catholics that is growing so rapidly in Western Europe and the Americas that was the impetus for John Paul II to speak of the need for a “new evangelization.” Pastoral ministry constitutes a third mission field. It is the evangelizing work that is done in the local parish and through church organizations that nourishes, forms, and deepens the faith and missionary identity of the men and women who are active in the life of the church. All pastoral ministry ought to prepare those who have been evangelized to become evangelizers.

Successful evangelization efforts in each of these fields are dependent on the exercise of the secular charism of the laity. If the full outpouring of the Spirit is to be realized in the New Evangelization, it will be because individual women and men have appropriated a vocational identity that is expressed in their daily lives.

The Challenge

The New Evangelization is rich with the potential for initiatives inviting people to encounter Christ and experience new life in the Church. To achieve this potential, a number of challenges from within the culture need to be addressed.

There are many people who have not heard the Good News because it is preached in a world that is increasing secular in its outlook. In a culture in which individualism, relativism, and self-indulgence are prized, it is difficult to propose a lifestyle of self-sacrifice and self-gift in any kind of compelling way. Increasingly, popular culture relegates faith to the realm of the personal and private. Any form of sharing faith is seen as suspect. In many people's

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7 I’ve taken the naming of these mission fields from the work of Cardinal Thomas Williams, “Mission and Evangelization: A Pacific Experience.” I think it is a helpful construct for separating the three distinct audiences of the New Evangelization.
minds, Catholics included, evangelization is synonymous with proselytizing. In any form, proselytizing is uninviting and unattractive. To this challenge, the evangelizer must exercise his or her prophetic charism. The great American theologian of the twentieth century, Avery Cardinal Dulles, observed, “In the absence of favorable influences from parents, teachers and the social environment, few persons will find their way to strong personal faith.”

Dulles also points to the anti-authoritarian nature of the modern person. Institutions are suspect, most especially those that claim an objective truth. Dulles suggests that the promise of the New Evangelization is that its end is an encounter with the Risen Lord. “In comparison with Christ, ecclesiastical institutes are mere means. An evangelically renewed Catholicism will seek to show that the entire apparatus of Catholicism, including the hierarchal ministry, the proclaimed word, and the sacraments have value because and insofar as it gives more adequate and authentic access to God who comes to us in Christ Jesus.” It is not only the world that presents challenges for the New Evangelization; the evangelizers themselves have obstacles to overcome.

For many Catholics, an evangelizing identity is something new and, in many cases, intimidating. As stated above and so well-addressed in Hagstrom’s Emerging Laity: Vocation, Mission and Spirituality, the appropriation of the Baptismal mission and vocation has yet to be fully realized. One expression of this reality is a lack of confidence and skill for the mission. Recently, a group of well-educated, active lay Catholics who were participating in a day of formation were asked to discuss why they find the Gospels convincing. The first woman to speak shared that she found the question insulting. She said, “As educated Catholic leaders, of course we find the Gospels convincing.” When pressed by the leader to share an example of a Gospel of which she felt convinced, she fell silent. Lay men and women need to be taught personal skills for evangelizing. The fullest expression of the prophetic charism of the laity is a laity capable of sharing faith in a way that is both natural and authentic. In the face of the anti-authoritarian climate of contemporary culture, the need for articulate and authentic witnesses is crucial for the success of the New Evangelization. Pope Paul VI observed of the modern mindset, “People today put more trust in witnesses than teachers, in experience than teaching, in life and action then in theories. The witness of Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission.” Lay women and men must be courageous in speaking the name of Jesus and giving witness to the way of life they have found in him. Formation begins with participation in the sacramental life of the church. Local parishes are not just the home of liturgical life; parishes are schools of formation for mission.

At present, parishes are not fully equipped to be schools of formation. In many places, opportunities for the education and formation of adult Catholics are lacking. Many parishes are consumed with the maintenance of the many programs and ministries that presently make up parish life. Parishes have neither the time nor energy to explore evangelizing initiatives that are new in ardor, expression, and method, as Blessed John Paul II asks for in Redemptoris Missio. Given the urgency of the mission of the New Evangelization, it seems appropriate to insist that parishes become schools of formation.

9 Dulles.
10 Participant, training session with author at Malta Forum Preparation, Bridgeport, CT, Spring 2011.
11 This challenge is addressed in both Apostolicam Actuositatem, #28-32 and Christifideles Laici, #60.
Conforming to the Mission

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. ... Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them...” (Romans 12:2-4).

In this letter to the Romans, Paul, the great evangelizer, brings together formation and mission in the word “conform.” In Pauline theology, “conformity” is configuring oneself to Christ for the purpose of mission. Paul speaks to the priestly, prophetic, and kingly charisms of Baptism. Spiritual formation begins in the acceptance of the call to holiness and the desire to grow in love of Jesus. Conversion is at the heart of an authentically Catholic character of evangelization. The first movement of Catholic evangelization is inward. It is a response to the call to live a life more deeply immersed in Christ. A commitment to ongoing conversion is an outward expression of the priestly charism. Our daily lives become rooted in prayer and nourished in the sacramental life of the church.

Personal witness in word and deed shapes the outward expression of the prophetic charism. Witness to the Christian life both by the example of one’s life and in testimony to one’s faith is essential to the work of lay evangelizers. Lay Catholics must develop the skills to articulate their own encounter with the Risen Lord, testify to the faith of the church, and interpret the signs of the times.

In our time, the kingly charism, expressed in works of charity and justice toward the transformation of the world, is the other explicitly Catholic evangelical charism. Evangelization is not only invitational; it has a corporate dimension in its mission “to make God’s reign present in every sphere of society.” Francis Cardinal Arinze suggests that the kingly charism is expressed in the Catholic concern for the common good and the “instinct for social solidarity.” Arinze points to the church’s mission of love that gives authority to its voice. “The concern for the common good is rooted in respect for the inalienable rights of the human person, the wellbeing and development of society as a whole, and for a truth built up in justice and animated by love.” The Church’s unwavering insistence on the respect for the dignity of the human person from conception to a natural death is one of the Church’s most compelling evangelizing messages.

In the 1987 apostolic exhortation Christifideles Laici, Blessed John Paul II writes that “a new state of affairs both in the Church and in the social, economic, political, and cultural life calls with a particular urgency for action of the lay faithful.” Of Blessed John Paul II’s thought, Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington writes, “We are baptized not only for our own salvation. Incorporation into the body of Christ is not an action of personal piety. Rather, we are engaged in a new life of the Spirit so that working in and through us, the Spirit might transform the whole world.” Over the last forty years, lay Catholics have felt most at home exercising the kingly charism. If the confidence to speak the name of Jesus and an understanding of what it means to be human can be more explicitly woven into the great works of justice, the church will fully recover her evangelizing identity.

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14 In Go and Make Disciples, the United States Bishops’ vision for evangelization, they identify the first goal as the ongoing conversion of the active Catholic. See USCCB, Go and Make Disciples (USCCB Publications, 1992).
15 Paul VI, Evangeli Nuntiandi, #18.
17 Arinze, 30.
18 Christifideles Laici, # 3.
Intellectual formation is the bond that grounds the Catholic evangelizer’s appreciation for the three-fold baptismal charisms. In the three-year preparation for the Jubilee year 2000, Blessed John Paul II offered a program of formation that explores these charisms within the life of the Trinity. The three-year program offers a three-prong structure formation in the parish.

The first prong is the study of Scripture directed toward a “renewed appreciation for Christ, Savior and Proclaimer of the Gospel.” Through appropriation of the Scriptures in prayer and reflection, the evangelizer finds his place in the ongoing story of salvation and the words to share it. Pope Paul VI rightly observes, “In the long run, is there any other way of handing on the Gospel than by transmitting to another person one’s personal experience of faith.” Familiarity with Scripture must be complemented by a renewed appreciation of adult catechesis and the formation of the mind. Just as the first Christian community in Acts 2 studied the teaching of the apostles, so must the lay Catholic develop a knowledge and confidence for sharing the teaching of the Church.

The second prong of formation is a deeper understanding of the person and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of the New Evangelization. A life animated by the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a life that gives testimony to the virtue of hope; it is the promise of salvation that offers the believer an innate spirit of hope. In the mind of Blessed John Paul II, this experience of hope is one of the most attractive and fruitful elements of the New Evangelization. It is often this spirit of hope, this positive approach to life, that marks the Christian and Catholic in the eyes of an outsider. In talking with people who enter the RCIA process, they often say that it was a colleague, friend, or neighbor’s approach or attitude to life that made them want to explore the Catholic faith. A renewed appreciation for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and awareness of how these gifts animate the daily activity of the laity gives rise to an outpouring of the kingly charism. Hope is the underpinning of a sense of responsibility for the common good, the environment, and the development of science and technology.

The final prong is a renewed appreciation for God who is father and for experiencing life “as a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father.” This is the priestly charism that claims us for our Father, created by God for union with God. It leads us to a life that flows from prayer, regular reception of the Eucharist and reconciliation, and a profound understanding that love of God must be expressed in love of our neighbors and the exercise of the theological virtue of charity. A laity prepared to be agents of evangelization is a laity that has access to rich and diverse opportunities for ongoing spiritual growth and development in the form of liturgy, retreats, spiritual direction, and schools of formation.

Conclusion

The New Evangelization is a lens through which to focus the mission of the laity in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The need for the mission is realized in a world hungering for the spiritual yet rejecting the religious. Because the New Evangelization is directed not only toward individuals but also to the transformation of the world, it necessarily needs the collaboration of priest and laity, each exercising their particular priestly, prophetic, and kingly charism. It both demands and expresses the full maturing of the baptized lay person who appreciates the “radical newness of the ordinary life sanctified through Baptism.”

20 John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adviente, # 40.
21 Paul VI, Evangeli Nuntiandi, # 46.
22 John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente, #49.
23 Hagstrom, 42.